DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 244 318 CS 504 611

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TITLE Ethical Considerations in Building a Forensic Program.
PUB DATE Apr 84
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Central States Speech Association (Chicago, IL, April 12-14, 1984).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Codes of Ethics; Competition; *Debate; Educational Philosophy; *Ethics; *Faculty Advisers; High Schools; Judges; *Persuasive Discourse; Program Development; *Speech Communication; Theories
IDENTIFIERS *Debate Coaches

ABSTRACT

There are three systems of ethics applicable to forensics programs. The classical conception borrows from Quintilian's reference to a "good man speaking well." A second approach starts from the context of a democratic society and builds on the principles that should govern a speaker in that setting, among which are the obligation to select and present fact and opinion fairly and a responsibility to reveal the sources of one's information. A third ethical process is the concern with "ghost writing" expressed by Ernest G. Borman, who suggested that the speaker who allows others to provide the content and style of a speech robs the audience of the knowledge of the speaker's character. If one chooses to define a forensics program as an end unto itself--a coaching of 10 individual events--existing ethical systems will offer little help. If, however, one views participation in forensics as a training program for valuable skills applicable beyond the immediate competitive setting, rather than as an extracurricular coaching situation removed from the regular speech program, then ethics become relevant. This latter attitude raises the following implications: (1) the forensics "coach" must be a communications professional who plays an integral role in the larger communications program, (2) the student must be encouraged to view the contest events as a simulation of an actual speaking situation, and (3) all coaches and judges must also be encouraged to view the events as simulations of real speaking events, rather than as ritualized ceremonial occasions practiced by only an enlightened few for their own benefit. (HTH)

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ED244318

Ethical Considerations in Building a Forensic Program

Essays on Ethics in Communication: In Honor of Dr. Edna C. Sorber

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I find it most interesting to be here today to defend the individual events portion of forensics. As a devoted college debater, I can remember being literally thrown into an oral interpretation contest once and being coached by a fine lady, Dr. Wynette Barnett. Following my dismal showing in this event, Dr. Barnett suggested, in her kindliest manner, that as an interper, I made a great debater. Having not taken her advice, I find myself paying for my crimes by being on this program today.

When I first approached the topic of the ethical considerations in building a forensics program, I thought of the wonderful opportunity this could be to chastise all those judges and coaches who have not fully appreciated my efforts as participant and coach during the past many years. But being aware of my very recent departure from the field of coaching and the limited tenure of administrators I decided it was best not to burn too many bridges.

I would rather address two issues which I believe are important to the question of ethics and forensics--definition of terms, and the process of making choices.

We must first, in the usual scholarly way, define our terms. The term forensics can be used to include the theory and practice of argumentation and debate as well as the theory and practice of the various individual speaking events. However, the link with debate is probably

the most pronounced. The dictionary defines forensics as "the art or study of argumentation and formal debate." (Random House; p. 555). A similar perspective is taken by the National Developmental Conference on Forensics which defined forensics as "an educational activity primarily concerned with using an argumentative perspective in examining problems and communicating with people." (p. 11) A quick glimpse through the comments contributed to the National Developmental Conference on Forensics further reinforces the link between the term forensics and the activity called debate. This definition ignores the fact that individual events are present in the forensics "family," even if they have not achieved full definitional standing as yet.

For the purpose of this paper, I would like to define forensics as individual events, recognizing that this is not the only, nor most common, usage. There are several sound reasons for dealing with individual events as a legitimate aspect of forensics. First, the most obvious has to do with the make-up of this program, and the title of the paper which follows mine. Beyond this obvious criterion, however, is the recognition of the growth and prominence of individual speaking events in the competitive community. Those of you who work actively in the field can attest to the growth both in numbers of participants and in numbers of programs, of strictly individual events competitors. A quick glance at major programs in forensics will identify those schools which once fielded nationally recognized debate programs who now restrict their activities to individual events. The growth of the AFA

and NIET competition, which rivals the NDT in prominence and participation, further attests to the importance of these programs as entities separate from our traditional notion of forensics and debate as synonymous terms.

Assuming for the moment that forensics means individual events, let us then move to a definition of what a forensics program is in this context. We could most easily define forensics from an operational point of view, simply explaining what it is that coaches of forensics programs do. What we do is to coach students who compete in the ten AFA/NIET recognized events of persuasive, informative, extemporaneous, impromptu and after dinner speaking, of interpretation of prose, poetry, and drama, of duo interp and communication analysis. This definition implies that individual events competition is an end unto itself. It is roughly analogous to my understanding of the justification for a college football program at a small school. The program involves many students who enjoy participating, have an outlet for their competitive urges, and learn about the joy of victory and the agony of defeat. There are also side effects which can be pointed to with pride. The school, as well as the coach and the student, enjoy the prestige that goes with a winning performance, or less importantly but equally possible, learn to cope with a loss with grace and dignity. Students might gain from teamwork, comraderie and discipline. And while some programs may get overly competitive or exploitative, most are clearly recognized as good clean fun.

In other words, football can bring prestige to the school, the

coach and to the individual participant. And it can provide some training in teamwork, discipline and hard work. But, at small schools at least, it makes no pretense at career preparation nor direct connection to the larger academic process. And the same could be said for a forensics program which is defined operationally as tournament participation.

A second definition is based on a gaming and simulation methodology. It describes individual events as an educational process which attempts to recreate in a classroom or competitive setting those processes or skills relevant to some real world experiences. The assumption here is that all educated individuals must at some time give a persuasive or informative or extemporaneous presentation and some might even present an oral interpretation of literature and thus the competitive practice prepares the individuals for these possibilities. Research, organization and delivery skills, as well as appreciation of historical and literary materials, is a direct result of the activity.

These two definitions ask the individual interested in building a forensic program to choose between two differing perspectives. Are they to be a director of forensic activities or a teacher of certain communication processes? The ethical considerations of building a forensics program are vastly different depending upon which approach that individual wishes to take. To understand the significance of the questions, let us first look at three systems of ethics and their applicability to forensics programs. Turning first to the classical concep-

tion, we can borrow from Quintilian's reference to a "good man speaking well," as a guide to the product of a forensics program.

A second and more contemporary approach might be an adaptation of Karl Wallace's "Ethical Basis of Communication." Wallace starts from the context of a democratic society and presents four principles which should govern a speaker in that setting. Among these principles are the obligation to select and present fact and opinion fairly, and a responsibility to reveal the sources of one's information. (p. 1-4)

A third ethical process which might seem pertinent to forensic programs is the concern for ghostwriting expressed by Ernest G. Borman.

> "By means of speech man can experience what others have experienced, learn what others have learned, and most importantly, he can learn to know other men. In short, by means of speech one man's circle of experience can touch another's, thus widening both. But this function can only be served by honesty and integrity in the use of speech." (pp. 262-267)

Borman suggests that the speaker who allows others to provide the content and style of a speech robs the audience of the knowledge of the speaker's character.

These three ethical systems address themselves to the speaker in a real world setting. Evaluating the goals of a democracy and of the speaker in this democracy, the ethical standards dictate appropriate behavior. Each of these authors start with the assumption that it is the intent of the speaker to effect some change in the auditor, be that change the product of argumentation or persuasion. And each author assumes some kind of "truth-telling" as essential to this change process.

If we think of an individual events program as an end unto itself, there is little reason to assume any real world gain or loss from the speeches which students present. If we further see the contest situation as a closed environment of student and judge which is largely ceremonial in nature, then the premise of intent to change is also not present. Quintilian may be half applicable, for while the need for a good man is not readily apparent (and from some indications is not readily available today) the ability to speak well may be. However, what constitutes "well" in the political arena and what constitutes well in a contest room can be vastly different things, especially when we move beyond the public speaking events to the oral interpretation events. Similarly, Karl Wallace provides little help in guiding us to ethical standards for individual events programs. The emphasis on accuracy of sources, and the fair presentation of fact and opinion may be mildly relevant to the public speaking events (although current practice has clearly shown that winning form is not directly related to truth, fairness nor accuracy). But again, the oral interpretation events use minimal sources and deal only with accuracy in textual transcriptions.

Beyond these dictates is the false assumption that informative and persuasive speeches given in a contest setting are intended to change the attitudes or behaviors of the auditor/judge. The ceremonial intent is to impress the judge and thus receive a first place rating, but the issue presented is chosen not for its relevance to the student or the judge, but for its ability to lead to a winning decision.

Even Ernest Borman's concern with ghostwriting (a fact of life in most contest events) falls short of pertinence. Borman suggests that a speech allows one to know the true character of a politician, leader or speaker. Ghostwriting, he suggests, short circuits this knowledge. But in a contest setting, is such knowledge necessary or even desirable?

Therefore, if a person chooses to define a forensics program as the coaching of the ten existing individual events, it becomes apparent that existing ethical systems offer little guide to this activity. Like football, the continued existence of the program is justified by the numbers of students served, or the visibility of its successes. The end justifies the means is perhaps the most useful approach, and one which is found too often in programs currently in existence.

Some ethical system should be devised for those programs following this definition, but the system must clearly recognize the ceremonial nature of the process. Ability to adapt to the demands of the context of the contest environment would be the overriding concern. Programs must be judged on participants' ability to abide by the rules of the "game."

If, however, one wishes to choose the other definition, that is, to see participation in forensics as a training program for valuable skills applicable beyond the immediate competitive setting, then the question of ethics becomes important and applicable. We may then stress not only speaking well, but the other half of Quintilian's observation, a good man (generically speaking, I hope). And if we presume that our students will at some time try to enter the real world to influence

the political process and effect change through their speaking skills, then Wallace's concerns for fair and responsible presentation of fact and opinion become equally valid. And finally, if we believe that students must, in fact, learn to do research, to organize materials, to present ideas with clarity and to come to appreciate historical data and good literature, then we, like Borman, will be offended by ghostwriting, be it by a fellow student or an overly helpful coach.

I personally subscribe to the latter definition and the ethical requirements which it implies. If forensics programs are seen as a teaching/learning situation, rather than as an extracurricular coaching situation removed from the regular speech program, the following implications occur.

First, the forensics "coach" must be a communications professional who plays an integral role in the larger communications program. This person must understand not only the practice of competitive programs, but the rhetorical theory on which most of these events are based. The tenure of the faculty member is justified on the basis of professional participation in a comprehensive communications department rather than on the number of trophies retrieved and the size and visibility of the forensics squad.

Second, the student must be encouraged to view the events as training for some long term skills development. While winning is not evil, nor unrewarding, the point of winning as proof of skills development must not be overlooked. Similarly, the student must look toward

the time when speech efforts will be aimed toward effecting change in the larger world, and see this as a logical outcome of contest activity.

Finally, and most difficult of all, the coaches and judges must be encouraged to view the contest events as a simulation of an actual speaking situation, rather than as a ritualized ceremonial occasion practiced only by the enlightened few for their own benefit. Less emphasis need be placed on conformity to stylistic devices, be they the uniform size and color of the interp notebook or the debate-case-organized oration, and more stress placed on creativity and enthusiasm for a serious issue. The speech and the speaker must be judged not only in the confines of the contest room, but for their applicability beyond that room as well.

Edna Sorber clearly saw that debate was not an end in itself, but rather a means to that end. And while there were times when we, as her squad members, suspected that she believed there was something suspect about winning, we came to realize that the learning process was far more important to her than the handshake and trophy which accompanied success in that process. She made her choice in running her debate program. I suggest that each coach of a forensics program, be it debate or individual events, must make the same choice. And in so doing must recognize the ethical implications of that choice.

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